

INQUIRY ABOUT LEARNING AND LEARNERS

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Using retrospective miscue analysis to inquire: Learning from Michael

It was April. Michael, a third-grade student with learning disabilities (LD), and I had been working together on his reading twice a week since September. As part of our Retrospective Miscue Analysis (RMA) session, Michael listened to his audiotaped reading of the sentence in Figure 1 from *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo* (Blume, 1981).

After listening, Michael said that he heard himself substitute *over* for *around* and that he inserted *big*. He confidently explained that these were good miscues that made sense and showed he was predicting and thinking about the story. Michael's comments and responses demonstrated that he un-

derstood that reading is not about recognizing words to accurately reproduce the printed text but about constructing meaning. He valued his miscues as evidence that he was thinking and making sense of the text for himself as he read. This conversation with Michael about miscues and reading was very different than the talks we had had when we first began working together.

Michael and I first met when I asked the principal of his school if she could suggest the names of a few children having trouble with reading with whom I could work for a year. I wanted to understand more about why some children have difficulties with reading and how they can be better supported in be-

coming more proficient. This has been a driving inquiry for me, first as an elementary classroom teacher and now as a researcher working with children and as a teacher educator concerned with helping preservice teachers develop strategies to use with struggling readers in their own classrooms. On my journey of inquiry, I had already learned about miscue analysis and RMA. I had come to understand how readers' beliefs about reading, the reading process, and themselves as readers either constrain or liberate them. I realized that readers' beliefs about what reading is and how it is accomplished focus them on either predicting and constructing a meaningful text for themselves or on accurately reproducing the printed text in order to understand.

RMA had been used very successfully with older students and adults, helping them revalue reading as a transactive process of constructing meaning and revalue themselves as readers, learners, and language users (Y. Goodman, 1996; Goodman & Marek, 1996). I wondered if RMA could be used successfully with younger children. What did Michael believe about the reading process? Were those beliefs affecting his reading? Could I use RMA to help Michael reval-

Figure 1
A sentence from Michael's reading of *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo* (Blume, 1981)

He jumped all ^{over} around the ^{big} stage.

Miscue markings: Substitutions are written above the text; insertions are indicated with a caret.

ue his own reading process and himself and become a more proficient reader?

In this column, I describe one inquiry journey Michael and I took together. After providing a brief background on RMA and Michael, I explain how I used RMA in my sessions with Michael and the learning and revaluing that happened for each of us.

Retrospective Miscue Analysis

Miscues are unexpected responses a reader makes to a text (K. Goodman, 1996). Research (Brown, Goodman, & Marek, 1996) documents that miscues are not random, capricious, or evidence of carelessness but reveal the logical predictions readers make based on their background knowledge, experience, and what they know about language and how language works. In miscue analysis, a teacher/researcher has a "window" (Goodman, 1970) into a reader's use of language systems (semantic/pragmatic, syntactic, and graphophonic) and reading strategies (sampling, inferring, predicting, confirming/disconfirming, and correcting) and into how proficiently the reader integrates these systems and cues to construct meaning in a text. (For more information on miscue analysis, see Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987, 1996.)

In retrospective miscue analysis (RMA), readers are invited to look through that window with the teacher/researcher to examine their own reading process and to evaluate, understand, and learn from it (Y. Goodman, 1996; Goodman & Marek, 1996). To prepare for RMA, the reader is first audiotaped reading and retelling a text following standard miscue analysis procedures. In the next session, the reader listens to him/herself read while following along in the original text and discusses selected miscues with the teacher/researcher. They discuss why a particular miscue was made, if it made sense, how much it resembles the printed text, if it was corrected, and if it needed to be corrected. Through these discussions over time, readers develop and more regularly use strategies for constructing the meaning of a text. The reading process is demystified, and readers revalue reading and themselves as readers.

Before working with Michael, I pre-selected high-quality miscues for us to consider in order to focus our time primarily on emphasizing his strengths. After listening to the tape and marking his miscues on the typescript, I examined the typescript asking, "Where is there evidence of Michael using strategies proficiently that I can use to highlight strengths and help him understand and revalue the reading process and himself as a reader?" The miscues I chose included (a) uncorrected high-quality substitutions, omissions, and insertions that retained the meaning of the text and (b) self-corrections he made when his predictions did not make sense.

In our session, Michael listened to himself read the sentences with these selected miscues. Then we evaluated them and discussed how proficient readers use these same strategies to construct meaning. Just like proficient readers, he had self-corrected when his predictions didn't make sense and didn't correct when his substitutions, insertions, and omissions did make sense. The tape provided indisputable evidence of that. Gradually, the revaluing happened for Michael.

Michael's story

On our meeting days, Michael was usually waiting or looking for me when I arrived at the school. Our sessions began with our sharing what was new in our lives. As an avid sports fan, Michael eagerly provided play-by-play descriptions of the football game he played in over the weekend and commented on professional games that he watched on television. He talked about his mom, other family members, his neighborhood friends, the latest escapades of his 1-year-old brother, and his church activities. Michael talked about school, projects he was working on, and reports he had to research and write. He was polite, friendly, cooperative, and cheerful, but he lacked confidence as a reader and learner.

Michael's difficulties with reading began when he entered kindergarten. His mother, Karen, related that she read to Michael regularly when he was a young child, but he had not shown a real interest in reading. Michael's

kindergarten teacher described him as having difficulty focusing on letters and sounds. The following year he repeated kindergarten in an all-day program at a different school. Michael's difficulties with reading continued in first grade, and in second grade he was tested. The test results asserted Michael had learning disabilities in reading (decoding and comprehension), and spelling, and that he had Attention Deficit Disorder. He was put on medication in the spring of second grade. When there were no major changes in his behavior or achievement, Karen stopped the medication. I began working with Michael at the beginning of third grade. At that time, he received support from an aide in the classroom; twice a week he left the classroom to work on word meanings and associations and to see a reading specialist for additional help.

Michael's beliefs about reading and himself as a reader. To understand Michael as a reader and gain insight into the reasons for his difficulties with reading, I needed to know how he perceived reading and himself as a reader, the strategies he used, his view of good readers, and how he believed he could be a better reader. His answers to questions in the reading interview (Goodman & Marek, 1996; Goodman et al., 1987), comments during our conversations, and his reading of texts in our first sessions revealed those beliefs. The two strategies Michael named for dealing with something he didn't know when reading were to "sound it out" and to "ask the teacher." He thought that good readers usually read without difficulty and that when they do encounter difficulties, they sound out and always solve their problems. To help someone having trouble with reading, Michael said that he would get a friend to sound out the problem for the person. He thought his teacher would also help the person by sounding out. The most important thing about reading to Michael was remembering the words. When asked what he would like to do better as a reader, he stated he wanted to read the words better. I was not surprised that, when asked, he did not feel good about himself as a reader.

Michael's perception of reading as remembering words and sounding out was confirmed in an analysis of his

Figure 2
A portion of Michael's reading of "Strange Bumps"
(Lobel, 1975a)

- (1) Then Owl ^{UC sound 20 sec.} saw two ^{C pumps} bumps
- (2) yelled under the ^{UC \$ blant 12 sec.} black blanket
- (3) at the ^{C \$ brom} bottom of his bed.
- (4) "What can those ^{R C \$ strange} ^{P str-} strange bumps
- (5) be?" asked Owl.
- (6) Owl ^{AC} ^{UC \$ lefted} lifted up the ^{C blan-} blanket.
- (7) He ^{UC \$ lookted} looked down into the bed.
- (8) ^{C Owl} All he could see was darkness.

Additional miscue markings: *P* means the reader paused for the number of seconds indicated; *\$* indicates a nonword; a circle connected to a line(s) under a portion of the text marks a regression and the letter(s) in the circle indicates what occurred; *C* indicates the miscue was corrected; *R* indicates a straight repetition of the text; *UC* means an unsuccessful attempt was made to correct the miscue; *AC* means abandoned correct, that the expected response was read first and then abandoned in the regression.

reading. One of the first stories he read was "Strange Bumps" (Lobel, 1975a), a portion of which is shown in Figure 2. Michael's miscues showed that his primary focus seemed to be on reproducing the printed text word by word, not on reading a meaningful story. He paused for extended periods of time to sound out (see lines 1 and 2), continued reading when his substitutions (non-words or real words) didn't make sense and didn't sound like language (lines 1, 2, and 6), and abandoned a correct response for a nonword to produce something that graphically resembled

the text more closely (see line 7). His reading was slow and labored; he seemed to be more concerned with working on small segments of text than constructing a coherent whole. He sometimes covered an unknown word with his finger and moved it back letter by letter as he tried to sound it out.

Even with these inefficient strategies, Michael's strengths were evident. His retellings of this and other stories were usually strong. (In this story, he told about Owl thinking his feet under the blanket were strange bumps, not being able to get rid of them, and going

downstairs to sleep in his chair.) He sometimes corrected predictions or substitutions that didn't make sense (see lines 1, 3, 4, and 8) and solved problems as he read on and gathered more information in the text (see *blanket* in lines 2 and 6). While not shown in this portion, Michael also made some high-quality substitutions that he didn't correct.

Although Michael understood what he read, he did not construct meaning efficiently (Goodman, 1994). He needed to refine his understanding and comprehension of stories and greatly increase his use of efficient strategies. RMA provided opportunities to emphasize and affirm Michael's strengths for him and to build on them.

Supporting Michael through RMA and strategy lessons. In our first RMA session, Michael and I explored high-quality miscues he made while reading *The Three Little Pigs* (Madden, 1971). One such miscue is seen in Figure 3. Michael's concern with remembering the words and reproducing the text was again apparent in our discussion. On several occasions Michael substituted *called* for *cried* or *cried* for *called*. Although he recognized the similarity in their meanings, he insisted that his substitution of *cried* for *called* was not good because he believed it did not make sense. From my perspective, predicting and substituting *cried* for *called* was a high-quality miscue and evidence of Michael's strength as a reader. He integrated his knowledge that he needed a past tense verb (syntactic cueing system), his understanding of what was happening in the story (semantic/pragmatic cueing system), and his awareness of the graphic cues in the text (graphophonic cueing system), all without creating a major change in the story meaning. For Michael, however, his miscue didn't make sense because it wasn't an accurate reproduction of the printed text. He couldn't appreciate the high quality of the miscue and his strength and knowledge in making it because it wasn't the word in the text.

This discussion was typical of those in our first several RMA sessions. It didn't matter to Michael what the quality of his miscues were; if his reading wasn't accurate, it didn't make sense. He was very resistant to the idea that he

could still make sense if he changed the text, and that meaningful changes were evidence of his strength and knowledge of the story and language. To further help him understand this, I talked about the miscues I made while reading to him and used other strategy lessons such as selected deletions (Goodman et al., 1996). Sometimes I even covered a difficult text portion and talked him through what was happening in the story to encourage him to predict meaning using other available cues.

Then, in October, Michael read "Upstairs and Downstairs" (Lobel, 1975b). In our next session, Michael listened to the tape of the sentence in Figure 4 and identified his miscues. After we discussed how his miscues were meaningful and made sense, Michael asked why the author, Arnold Lobel, didn't phrase the sentence "'I am up,' said Owl" the way he had. Michael also suggested that Lobel could have written *upstairs* instead of *up*. Throughout this discussion it was clear that Michael was beginning to think about text differently. He was understanding that just as authors make decisions on how to create meaning in their stories, readers make those decisions too for themselves. He was seeing that as a reader, he had the responsibility of constructing a meaningful text that made sense to *him*. He was pushing the boundaries of his beliefs. The revaluing was beginning.

Our sessions continued through the fall and winter. We had conversations about the strategies of proficient readers and his strategies, miscues, and strengths. We talked about how the tape showed he knew how to use strategies like proficient readers do and that he just needed to do that more often. Michael began talking freely about these meaning-making strategies before there was evidence that he applied them to his reading. Gradually, though, he internalized his knowledge, and by November his reading and miscues showed that he was consciously beginning to monitor himself for meaning more closely. His long pauses, non-words, and multiple attempts on unknown words decreased. And there was an increase in his meaningful substitutions, in his searching for and integrating cues in addition to graphic cues,

and in his complex miscues showing less focus on remembering the words and more focus on constructing a meaningful text. He was more confident and articulate about reading and strategies; he began referring to himself as a good reader. The revaluing was growing.

Michael's growth. By spring, when asked what good readers do when they read, Michael named a variety of strategies, such as skip ahead and come back, substitute something that makes sense, and self-correct if reading is not making sense. In our RMA discussions about his miscues, he described his high-quality uncorrected substitutions as good because they made sense and explained his self-corrections as necessary for meaning. He pointed out how his miscues showed he was predicting and thinking.

During our final sessions together Michael read *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo* (Blume, 1981). While there were still places where he used inefficient strategies, he was much more focused on making sense and constructing meaning as he read than he had been in September, as the excerpt in Figure 5 shows. Michael usually corrected when his miscues didn't make sense (see lines, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 8) and didn't correct when they did (see lines, 2, 3, and 5). He inefficiently made multiple at-

tempts on *Gumber* in line 2 but later (line 7) efficiently made a name substitution and continued reading (the latter is what he usually did with this name). Twice he read the text correctly and abandoned that response for one that made more sense to him (see lines 3 and 6). (He, like Freddy in the story, was unfamiliar with the phrase "break a leg.") He transformed the syntactic structures in line 2 and line 3 to construct a parallel structure and text that made sense to him and didn't change the meaning of the story. His retelling was rich. Michael understood that his reading had to make sense to him and confidently took that challenge. The revaluing continued.

Conclusion

My experiences with Michael ended when the school year did. Michael's original view of the reading process as one of remembering the words had constrained and limited his ability to focus on meaning as he read. Understanding how central meaning is in reading and seeing his own strengths and building on them liberated him to use strategies flexibly with a goal of constructing a text that was meaningful and made sense to him. Michael was revaluing reading and himself as a reader.

When I reflected on our year together, I realized that although I had start-

Figure 3
A sentence from Michael's reading of *The Three Little Pigs* (Madden, 1971)

cried
The wolf called, "Little pig, little pig,
let me in."

Figure 4
A sentence from Michael's reading of "Upstairs and Downstairs" (Lobel, 1975b)

said Owl
"I am up," he said.

Figure 5
A portion from Michael's reading of *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo* (Blume, 1981)

- (1) "Break a leg?" Freddie said.
- (2) Ms. Gumble said, "That miss means
- (3) good luck. Do your best in the play."
- (4) "Oh," Freddie said. I thought you
- (5) meant I should fall off the stage and really
- (6) break my leg."
- (7) Mrs. Gumble said. She ruffed
- (8) Ms. Gumber laughed again. She ruffed
- fled Freddy's hair.
1. good luck. When
2. Do your best in the, a, the play.

Additional miscue markings: Circled text was omitted.

ed this inquiry journey alone, Michael had joined me along the way. Through RMA Michael had become an inquirer too. Our discussions about reading and his miscues had caused him to wonder about (and revalue) reading and readers. And, just as importantly, RMA had helped him see reading as a process of inquiry, one in which he continually asked himself questions such as "Does what I am reading make sense?" and "Does what I am reading sound like language?" and, if the answers were "No," "What are my options for changing that?" By becoming an inquirer, asking questions and seeking answers, Michael had taken control of and responsibility for his reading and become a more empowered reader. While we didn't completely solve all of his difficulties, assuming responsibility for and control of his reading with a focus on constructing meaning was a step in the direction of being a proficient reader.

I learned and grew a lot through Michael that year. He helped me revalue RMA as a tool to support readers in becoming more proficient. RMA is a powerful process, one I hope others will use to invite struggling readers to inquire, learn, and grow in understanding the reading process.

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